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Racism as Mass Insanity: An Analysis of "On Being Crazy"

The brilliance of W. E. B. Du Bois' "On Being Crazy" is its total coverage of race relations in the early 20th century. Du Bois wrote this short story about racism in American society, which he compares to insanity, but it is also a philosophical reflection on the social class his society wishes to impose upon him. In the story, an African American man is repeatedly harassed and obstructed by various Texans while attempting to purchase basic goods and services. After being denied a train ticket, the narrator meets a homeless man who scornfully calls him a nigger. Through his story of a man unsuccessfully exercising more and more basic social privileges, Du Bois presents the reader with the absurdity of the African American condition in his time. To be black was to be shamed and humiliated until one felt lower than the lowest white man.

From beginning to end, the social status of the narrator sharply declines as a direct result of those who deprive him increasingly of basic goods and services. At the start, the narrator is a consumer of middle to upper class luxuries, such as dining out or enjoying a performance of Beethoven's fifth symphony. In reaction to the color of his skin, his fellow patrons ask why he would go where he is not wanted and impose his

presence on others. Their accusations, although not physically preventing him from eating his meal or listening to the symphony, impose a second-class status on the narrator and transparently express that he does not belong. Afterwards, he is denied a room by a hotel clerk and a sleeper car by a ticket agent, each citing race as the primary reason. These interactions go further in their oppression because not only is the narrator denied acceptance among his working peers; he is denied basic goods and services despite an economic incentive to accept his patronage. Having to walk to his destination, the narrator meets another wayfarer who is clearly of very low social status. The story ends with a series of illogical attacks and racial slurs shouted at the narrator, who is left contemplating the way his society has treated him.

Each of these characters give race as a reason why the narrator, ostensibly their peer, is a few rungs lower than themselves on the social ladder. The woman's question "Do you enjoy being where you are not wanted?" (1) in the theatre suggests that the narrator's very presence is breaking deeply cherished social norms. While this certainly was true for Du Bois' time period, her implication is that the narrator should not be allowed to enjoy the symphony, and that his skin color is somehow an act of aggression. The same holds true for his table companion at the diner. Contrast the woman's comment about being where one is not wanted with the hotel clerks' comment "This is a white hotel," and later much more coarsely, "We don't keep niggers" (2). Both believe race to be sufficient grounds for discrimination against the narrator, but the hotel clerk first hides his brutality with a weak euphemism and then drops the facade when the narrator insists on his patron status. In some sense the lower classes are more willing to "tell it like it is" rather than shroud their intentions in abstract social norms and

rhetoric. The drifter, who rambles on about the dirty narrator's intention to court his sister, drops even the illusion of that racism can be reasonable. Although the drifter's viewpoint is patently crazy, it tells the most truth about racism.

A consistent perception among the five individuals is that the narrator wishes to enjoy these services among white folk because he is attempting to advance "social equality," which I believe takes on a different meaning for each character. The man in the restaurant asks "are you aware, sir, that this is social equality?". The narrator replies "nothing of the sort, sir, it is hunger" (1), and the woman in the theatre also makes reference to social equality as a grievance. When the hotel clerk says he doesn't want social equality, the narrator replies "neither do I" (2). Because the narrator doesn't see that his actions represent an advancement in social equality, I was forced to consider the different ways each individual interprets the term social equality. "Social equality" can be a difficult concept to understand, because the word "social" encompasses a very large number of domains. The domain these characters are focusing on is race, and racial equality, which was very controversial in America well beyond the year 1907. However, the narrator's denial of his advancement of racial equality suggests that he does not think of social equality in terms of race, but more within such domains as wealth, intellect, and sophistication. It is because these characters see race as a major factor in determining social status that they react to the narrator making a scene, denying patronage, or walking in the mud. Their fear of racial equality causes them to perceive the narrator's patience and politeness as "rudeness" or even "dirtiness."

Du Bois uses the drifter's narrow focus on race as a determinant of the narrator's character to make a statement about how racism becomes as a mechanism to

disenfranchise both African Americans and Whites. Surprisingly, the only aggressor who does not make any direct reference to “social equality” as a negative is the drifter, who is lacking in a significant number of the aforementioned social domains. He is angry, irrational, penniless, and starving. The narrator observes that despite conflicts of race, the interests of the drifter and poor African Americans overlap. He remarks, “I think you and the Negroes should get together and vote out starvation.” “We don’t let them vote,” the drifter replies, because “Niggers are too ignorant to vote” (2). His retort to the narrator’s suggestion to vote out starvation with negroes is purely on grounds of racism and not any objection to wealth redistribution. Furthermore, the delusion of the narrator's inferiority renders the drifter unable to perceive these issues outside the domain of race, which is ultimately detrimental to him. Similarly, the drifter would rather walk in mud than next to a black man. This is an example situational irony: he intends to avoid the dirt that he perceives is a quality of the narrator’s skin by literally walking in the mud. He claims “Niggers are dirty,” which allows him to ignore the obvious contradiction (2).

Ultimately, Du Bois uses the specific delusions of each character to show that racism is simply mass insanity. The drifter's delusion that black men are trying to court his sister are not that unlike the narrator's table companion who believes the narrator is personally attacking him by enjoying a meal. However, the narrator's persistent engagement and politeness with these individuals seems to be a different kind of madness. In many situations, the narrator gives the benefit of the doubt to those who attack him. After being told “this is a white hotel,” the narrator replies “Such a color scheme requires a great deal of cleaning... but I don't know that I object” (1), and later

on attempts to reason his way out of the drifter's delusion that he wants to marry the drifter's sister, but once the narrator denies it, the drifter angrily yells "Why not!" (3). By having the clearly insane drifter describe the narrator as crazy, Du Bois shows that there is no point to the narrator's attempts to reason with the irrational.

W. E. B. Du Bois' "On Being Crazy" takes on a nuanced view of racism at the turn of the Twentieth century that is not merely founded on the idea that it is simply wrong. The racism from each individual towards the narrator affects that person in a unique way, which exposes the irrationality behind racism in all its forms, but also handles the social layers that get mixed in with it. When Du Bois contrasts these conflicts of race with different social classes, it's clear that distinctions based on race are utterly arbitrary, causing serious damage to both the aggressor and the narrator.

Citations

Du Bois, W. E. B. "On Being Crazy." American Negro Short Stories. Hill & Wang

Publishers, 1906. Web. 26 Feb. 2016.